

January 15, 2016

First Congregational Church Responses to CPAC Questions

1. Since this proposal involves the public's funds going to a private entity, what is the public purpose? How will the public benefit?

The Town would benefit from this grant in two primary ways:

First, the grant's use for a sprinkler system in the church building would substantially increase the likelihood that the building will remain in its present condition as a structure contributing to the aesthetic and historical values of the Dickinson Local Historic District. The absence of this system risks irrevocable damage to the structure were it to catch fire.

Secondly, the church is a public building, heavily used by groups and people not directly affiliated with the congregation. These include:

- a) Not Bread Alone – This soup kitchen is an integral part of the Town of Amherst's support services for its low-income and homeless population. It serves a meal to an average of approximately 50 persons three times each week. The volunteers who staff the kitchen are also often town residents.
- b) Primera Iglesia – an Hispanic Christian congregation of approximately 50-100 persons. In addition, the building currently hosts regular services by another small, unaffiliated congregation.
- c) Spring Street Preschool, with approximately 25 children enrolled.
- d) Six Alcoholics Anonymous groups on multiple occasions through a typical week.
- e) Homeless individuals in need of shelter during the day. The building is open from approximately 8 AM to 9 PM each day, and anyone is welcome to take shelter in our lounge and use our restrooms. On occasion, we find that an individual has hidden in the building overnight.
- f) Out-of-town visitors, many of whom stop by as a part of their visit to the Emily Dickinson Museum.
- g) UMass Amherst Choral groups, who hold their spring concert here each year, attended by their families, friends, and community members. The sanctuary is a favored musical performance space for many outside groups.
- h) Non-congregants who come for the funeral or memorial service or the wedding for a friend or relative.
- i) Many other occasional groups use our meeting, dining, and performance spaces.

2. The total cost for the building project is over a million dollars and \$700,000+ is coming from the church. If CPA funds were not awarded, would the priority of the Church be to install fire suppression or an elevator?

The congregation's priority is to install an elevator at this time. However, the members most involved in care of the building recognize the risk of not having a fire-suppression system and have strongly advocated with the congregation for its inclusion in this project.

If the CPA funds were not awarded, the congregation would have the following choices:

- Fund the entire project without external assistance. This approach could reduce our reserves to where our ability to properly maintain the building would be of concern.
- Proceed with an elevator without sprinklers.
- Fund the sprinklers now and postpone the elevator until the church's financial condition, with or without a future CPA grant, would permit it.
- Postpone all work.

3. You are asking for a very large sum for fire suppression, but your priority appears to be to do something else. Please explain.

The congregation seeks to improve this 1867 building, which received its last major modernization in 1959, so that it will be more accessible to everyone and more functional for both the congregation and the community groups that share it with us. As the project has evolved, it has come to have the following principal elements:

- Elevator
- Renovated main floor restrooms
- Upgrade of the electrical power supply
- Sprinkler and fire alarm system

Each of these improvements will contribute to the revitalization of the building and help it meet the expectations of 21st century visitors and occupants. Our application for CPA funds focused on the sprinkler system because that component contributes most directly to the physical preservation of the building. We believe this part of the project is most congruent with the Town's stated objectives for making CPA grants.

4. How does that building fit into the historic fabric of the town?

The church is one of a number of grand buildings, mostly from the Victorian era, prominently visible as one proceeds westerly along Main Street toward the town center, including the two Hills mansions, the Dickinson Homestead, the Evergreens, Town Hall, and 30 Boltwood Walk. This assemblage is a unique attribute of Amherst.

Within the town center, the church is a part of a concentration of historic buildings that are a legacy of the vibrant community life of 19th century Amherst, including the Pacific Lodge Mason's Hall, Grace Episcopal Church, the former Baptist Church (now occupied by Amherst College), First Congregational Church's 3rd meeting house (now Amherst's College Hall), and the other historic buildings of Amherst College.

This fourth meeting house of the congregation, located at 165 Main Street, and the parsonage on Seelye Street were constructed in 1867 under the leadership of Austin Dickinson. With the famous exception of Emily Dickinson herself, all the members of her immediate family were lifelong worshippers and important contributors to the life of the church. Emily Dickinson's upbringing within First Church is recognized as a significant component of the spiritual outlook expressed in her poems and letters. The church was designed by George Hathorne, clad in Monson granite quarried in Pelham, and represents well the high Victorian gothic style popular at that time.

As an aside, we would also note that when local realtors promote the historic environment of Amherst, they frequently include a photo of the church.

As a part of its outreach mission, First Church is firm and clear in seeing its building as a community resource and asset, an ongoing vital contributor to public services and the visual experience at the historic heart of downtown Amherst.

5. Are you aware there would be a historic restriction on the building?

We are aware of this condition and have enlisted the services of Attorney Bill Hart to prepare the deed restriction and grant agreement.

6. Could the Church mortgage the improvements over time to make the costs more in keeping with what the members can afford to spend?

We have considered a mortgage but believe that a bank would be unlikely to lend to us based on our current operating budget condition. Over the past five years, the church's annual operating expenses have exceeded income. The income shortfall has been made up by an annual draw on our endowment. As this budget gap grows, the capacity of the endowment to generate sufficient income to fill it will diminish, and if the requirements to raise income erode capital, the church's financial wellbeing will erode. Taking on a mortgage will simply increase church expenses and increase the gap between overall income and expenses, depleting the endowment only faster. Instead of seeking a mortgage, we would more likely choose one of the alternative approaches listed in our response to question #2.

7. Do you intend to come back for additional funding in the future?

We have no plans to request additional funds. The sprinkler system seems to us to be an essential part of preserving and maintaining the building for the future. Our objective is to see funded and installed in FY2017 a complete sprinkler system. We can think of no other improvement that would be so clearly in the Town's historic preservation interest.

8. Have you brought your proposal to the Historical Commission? What has been its response?

Yes. We submitted our proposal to the Historical Commission on December 3, 2015, and engaged with Commission members in a discussion of its merits on December 14, 2015. We understand that the Historical Commission will meet on January 21, 2016 to prioritize the CPA grant proposals it has reviewed.

Those of us in attendance on December 14 had differing impressions of members' reactions to our application. Since then, we have received no formal comment from them but have assumed that they would communicate their position directly to the CPA committee.